Amid preparations for India-Pakistan talks, deadly bomb blast in west India

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The terrorist bombing that killed eleven and injured more than 50 in the west Indian city of Pune last Saturday was clearly aimed at inciting communal enmity and derailing any rapprochement between India and Pakistan.

In the days preceding the attack, India and Pakistan had agreed that their foreign secretaries would meet in New Delhi on February 25 for the first high-level talks between the two countries in more than 14 months.

Saturday's bombing targeted the German Bakery, a restaurant and baker's shop in Pune, frequented by foreign tourists. Two foreigners were among the eleven dead and a dozen of the injured were foreigners. Made of RDX, a military-grade explosive, the bomb was set off when a waiter opened the unclaimed backpack in which it had been hidden.

The bombing in Pune was the first major terrorist attack in India since the November 2008 commando-style raid on Mumbai which killed 166 people. The second largest city in the west Indian state of Maharashtra, Pune lies about 100 kilometers southeast of Mumbai.

New Delhi declared Pakistani authorities responsible for the Mumbai raid, which was reputedly mounted by an anti-Indian militia previously patronized by the Pakistani military-security establishment, and within days of the attack, India indefinitely suspended the "composite dialogue" it had launched with Pakistan in the aftermath of a war crisis in 2001-2.

India's largest opposition party, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), immediately seized on the Pune bombing to reiterate its opposition to New Delhi's forthcoming talks with Islamabad. Before police had even had a chance to sift through the wreckage for evidence, BJP spokesman Prakash Javadekar urged the government to reconsider its decision to hold talks with India's traditional arch-rival. "Terror and talks cannot go together," declared Javadekar.

Unlike in November 2008, India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government has not rushed to blame Pakistan for the Pune bombing. From the outset, Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram took a cautious attitude, telling reporters, "Nothing is ruled out, nothing is ruled in," and declining to discuss whether the Pune blast might complicate or scuttle the planned talks.

On Sunday, the UPA government announced the talks will proceed, while restating India's previously announced objective of focusing bilateral negotiations with Pakistan on "terrorism." By this it means its demand that Pakistan choke off all support for anti-Indian Islamicist militias including the insurgents in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state and territory claimed by Pakistan since its creation in 1947.

A major factor in India's decision to initiate talks with Pakistan has been pressure from Washington. The US views the fractious relations between India and Pakistan as a major obstacle to its prosecution of war in Afghanistan and hopes that a warming of relations between New Delhi and Islamabad will help persuade the Pakistani government to transfer troops from its eastern border with India to its border with Afghanistan.

During a trip to Islamabad this week, US Under Secretary of Defense Michele Flournoy confirmed that the US is working behind the scenes to promote a lessening of Indo-Pakistani tensions. "We will do everything in our power," said Flournoy, "to support a successful outcome of the talks, an outcome that everyone is looking for."

India, however, has repeatedly said that next week's talks are only exploratory and should not be construed as constituting resumption of its "composite dialogue" with Pakistan.

This point was underlined by India's External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna in a television interview Wednesday. "We do not know what issues the Pakistan Foreign Secretary is going to raise," said Krishna. "The brief for our [Foreign] Secretary is that terror is the centre and focus point of the talks."

Indian officials have made clear that only if Islamabad acts on its demands relating to "terrorism" will it consider resuming the long-stalled composite dialogue.

As on previous occasions, the Indian media has rushed to pin responsibility for the Pune blast on Muslim fundamentalist groups, including the Pakistan-based Laskhar-e-Taiba (LeT).

The Indian press has focused on the fact the David Coleman Headley, a reputed LeT operative, allegedly carried out surveillance in Pune.

A US citizen of part-Pakistani parentage who is currently under arrest in the US for participating in a terrorist plot targeting Denmark, Headley has been the subject of much

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media comment in India in recent months. Headley has a long history of working for US government agencies, including the US Drug Enforcement Agency, and there is good reason to suggest that he joined the LeT at the US government's request. Although India accuses him of having helped orchestrate the Mumbai attack, the FBI has refused to allow Indian security officials to question him.

Noteworthy—although typical—has been the Indian media's refusal to even raise the possibility that the Pune attack could have been the work of Hindu nationalist extremists bent on disrupting the Indi-Pakistan talks and inciting animosity against Muslims.

Shortly before the Mumbai attack, police broke up a Hindu terrorist group responsible for multiple bomb blasts in Malegaon, a city in north-west Maharashtra, and in Modasa, a town in the bordering state of Gujarat. These blasts had initially been blamed on Muslim extremists, although they targeted Muslims. The Malegaon accused include several persons associated with various BJP- and RSS-aligned organizations, a retired Indian Army major, and a serving lieutenant colonel. The Malegaon bomb plotters are only the best known of several Hindu terrorist groups to come to light in recent years.

The November 2008 Mumbai atrocity put an end to the Indian media's limited interest in investigating "Hindu terrorism." The BJP and its Maharashtra-based ally, the Shiv Sena, it need be added, had mounted a vociferous campaign in defence of the alleged leaders of the Malegaon bomb plot, charging that they were being framed by the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad. Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray went so far as to say that if they had carried out the bombings they "cannot be blamed "since "every day Islamic terrorists are planting bombs to kill Hindus in India" (See: India army officers linked to Hindu supremacist terrorism)

In recent weeks the Shiv Sena and a Shiv Sena split-off, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), have been mounting chauvinist and violence-laden campaigns against north Indian migrants, under the slogan "Mumbai for Marathis," and against Muslims.

The Shiv Sena targeted Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan, a Muslim, because he spoke out against its chauvinist campaign against the participation of Pakistani cricketers in Indian Premier League matches.

Following the Pune bombing, the Shiv Sena accused the Congress Party state government of having facilitated the attack, because it had redeployed police to Mumbai to prevent Shiv Sena activists from making good on their threat to disrupt screenings of Khan's latest film *My name is Khan.*

Predictably the Shiv Sena blamed Pakistan for the Pune bombing. An editorial published Thursday in its newspaper *Saamna* declared: "Whoever is responsible, it is clear that they have Pakistan's backing. Terror organisations are a part of the Pakistani military set-up, they are trained in Pakistani army camps with the aim to annihilate Hindus in India and form a Muslim government here."

On Tuesday, three days after the attack, an unknown group calling itself the Lashkar-e-Taiba Al Alami, claimed responsibility for the Pune blast. A person who identified himself as Abu Jindal phoned the Islamabad office of the Indian English-language daily the *Hindu* and said his group had carried out the attack because of India's "refusal" to discuss the Kashmir issue in its forthcoming talks with Pakistan and because of New Delhi's close ties with the US. Jindal claimed his group had split from the Laskhar-e-Taiba because it took orders from Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), the military's intelligence bureau.

Soon after, a second claim of responsibility, this time by way of a text message, was made by another unknown group, the Indian Mujahideen Kashmir.

These claims prove nothing, as even Indian officials concede. "Such claims have no value from an investigation point of view," a top Indian security official told the press. "It could be a red herring to distract attention from the actual perpetrators."

In response to last Saturday's bombing, Indian police have detained nearly 40 people for questioning, with arrests being made in Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore and Hampi (Karnataka). Indian security forces frequently mount dragnets that target Muslims, Kashmiris or Bangladeshi immigrants.

While it is certainly possible that last Saturday's bombing atrocity was perpetrated by Islamicists, with or without the support of sections of Pakistan's security forces, there are several other groups in India, Hindu supremacist terrorists or even elements from within the military, who are capable of resorting to terror to thwart any reconciliation between New Delhi and Islamabad.

The Pune bomb blasts underscore the communally and geopolitically charged atmosphere that has been created on the subcontinent by the rival ruling elites of India and Pakistan.

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